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Bringing aquatic foods into UK food systems debates

Workshop Report – Summary

7th March 2024

City, University of London

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Overview

On March 7th, 2024, The Marine Conservation Society, the International Institute for Environment & Development (IIED), and the Centre for Food Policy, City, University of London convened a workshop on 'bringing aquatic foods into UK food systems debates'. The half-day workshop brought together 23 people from 17 organisations including universities, non-governmental organisations (NGO) and campaign groups, research institutes and funding bodies. This document provides a high-level summary of the discussions, and suggestions for next steps.

The workshop addressed two high-level questions:

- What are the barriers to integrating aquatic foods in debates about UK food systems?
- What research gaps need to be addressed to bring aquatic foods into these debates?

We have summarised the discussion that took place in response to these questions, and in plenary sessions, below.

1. A tale of two challenges

The workshop was framed around the exclusion of aquatic foods from *debates* about food systems, but much of the discussion also focused more specifically on low aquatic food *consumption* in the UK. These issues are clearly related. For example, the tendency to view aquatic foods primarily as a source of livelihoods and an economic commodity, rather than as food which can help alleviate hunger and improve health, was thought to contribute to low consumption. The separation between food, agriculture and land use on one hand – and fisheries, aquaculture and marine governance on the other, was also perceived to affect consumption patterns.

In many cases, the barriers to these two challenges – bringing aquatic foods into UK food system debates, and increasing aquatic food consumption – are the same. For example, the relative invisibility of aquatic animals and plants likely contributes to both the low cultural value food from aquatic sources, and to their being overlooked in legislation, policies and strategies related to food, such as animal welfare and food security. However, when it came to discussing how and why we might address these challenges, there were also clear differences. Learning from past experiences, including why previous initiatives around aquatic foods have succeeded or failed, was suggested as a way to address barriers to both challenges.

2. Mapping research gaps

The workshop aimed to identify policy-relevant research gaps that could help to bring aquatic foods into work on the UK food systems transformation. The topics and questions proposed reflected the dual interest of participants in understanding the barriers to both integrating aquatic foods into food systems debates, and increasing seafood consumption in the UK.

We clustered the gaps into the following thematic areas:

- **Policy:** understanding and influencing policy on aquatic foods, and the broader food system, including mechanisms for more joined-up policies; understanding decision-making processes and influencing political actors, including through industry levy bodies.
- **Aquatic food impacts:** data on the economic, environmental, and nutritional impacts (positive and negative) of aquatic foods, including overseas impacts of UK consumption. This

would enable comparative analysis of the benefits of trade in, and local consumption of, aquatic foods, as well as between aquatic and terrestrial foods.

- **Supply chains:** understanding and improving the processing, logistics and manufacturing capabilities for aquatic foods in the UK; understanding supply and demand and the economics of imports and exports; how to improve innovation in aquatic food products, and relatedly, increase their diversity, availability, and appeal.
- **Consumer behaviour:** understanding and informing behaviour change interventions, particularly food purchasing behaviours.
- **Price and affordability:** price, price elasticity, and aquatic food affordability.
- **Ethics and power:** justice and equitability related to aquatic foods and the ocean, and unequal power dynamics in aquatic food sectors.
- **Research methods:** participatory research and co-designed research, working with citizens, seafood sector stakeholders, and retailers.

3. Multiple agendas and visions

The conversations throughout the workshop highlighted the plurality of agendas related to aquatic foods in the UK, both in the room and across the 'aquatic food system'. Some participants were focused on addressing specific challenges around aquatic food production and consumption – e.g., reducing waste, improving processing, increasing consumption and access for some communities. Others were interested in contributing to positive food systems outcomes and transformation through a focus on the role of aquatic foods – e.g., understanding how aquaculture can be included in, and contribute to the goals of UK food policies.

There was acknowledgement that bringing additional actors into these conversations would likely lead to a further fragmentation of objectives. In the closing discussion, there was agreement that any new collaboration on aquatic foods needs to have a strategic, well-defined scope and shared vision and objectives. This challenge was summed up by one individual as: *What problem is solved by bringing aquatic foods into the food systems discussion?*

4. Ways forward

The final session explored the idea of staying in touch and collaborating as a group through some kind of network or platform. A knowledge-sharing or -exchange network across industry, retail, policy and local government could facilitate cross-sector collaboration to enhance research and practice and share data, provide valuable insights for policy, and create peer mentoring opportunities. If assembled quickly, the network could undertake strategic research and communications ahead of the upcoming election, and also engage with the lead-up to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) milestone in 2030.

We discussed whether such a network could also engage in advocacy and lobbying activities, and speak with a unified voice to promote aquatic foods in food system dialogues. The [Fruit & Vegetable Alliance](#), a cross-sector partnership that has put forward a vision for UK horticulture, and which influences UK policy, was suggested as a possible model to emulate. Upcoming events on aquatic foods in Scotland later in the year could provide a moment to reconvene, including with additional collaborators, and/or to leverage the network.

There was support for widening any collaboration to include diverse stakeholders, e.g., those working in hospitality, catering and media. There was particular interest in targeting actors working with agriculture or in the wider agricultural sector, but we also discussed how to bring retailers, fisheries and aquaculture actors into the conversation, as well as industry levy bodies, such as Seafish and the AHDB. However, the complexity of the aquaculture and fisheries sectors, and the differences between them, would need to be managed.

Despite enthusiasm for continuing to communicate as a group, participants questioned whether creating a network focused on aquatic foods is the right approach. An alternative could be for individuals to act as 'champions' in food systems spaces, and seek to introduce aquatic foods into existing food networks. However, this may not lead to the level of impact that a high-profile, consolidated effort could achieve.

5. Next steps

We propose taking forward 3 initiatives:

1. Establishing a 'blue food' knowledge-exchange platform.

We propose to co-design and secure funding for a cross-sector platform spanning industry, research and policy, loosely modelled on the [Food Research Collaboration](#). The platform's objectives would be to raise the profile of aquatic foods in research and policy on food systems in the UK; to bridge the gap between evidence on aquatic and terrestrial food systems; and to inform policy and practice on food systems. The platform would likely take the form of a steering group and secretariat to coordinate day-to-day activities, with regular inputs from a wider network of stakeholders. Activities could include strategic research communications, targeted policy influencing, networking events, and mentorship schemes to facilitate greater collaboration across 'blue' and 'green' food systems work.

2. Coordinating proposals on aquatic food research gaps.

We suggest keeping in touch to collaborate on proposals related to research gaps on the challenges, opportunities and impacts of shifting aquatic food production/consumption for improved food systems outcomes. We can set up an email distribution list, regular online meeting or LinkedIn group to facilitate sharing of proposals and scoping of interest.

3. Investing in aquatic foods in further education.

Several different initiatives could support the integration of aquatic foods into food systems approaches through further education, to ensure that the next generation of food systems scholars, practitioners and decision-makers are thinking about aquatic foods as part of the food system. This could take the form of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) or summer school, or a series of webinars, through a university or other research institution.

Authors

This report was authored by Christian Reynolds (Centre for Food Policy, City University), Giulia Nicolini (International Institute for Environment & Development) and Jack Clarke (Marine Conservation Society), with the contribution of workshop participants. A full list of contributors can be found in the full report.